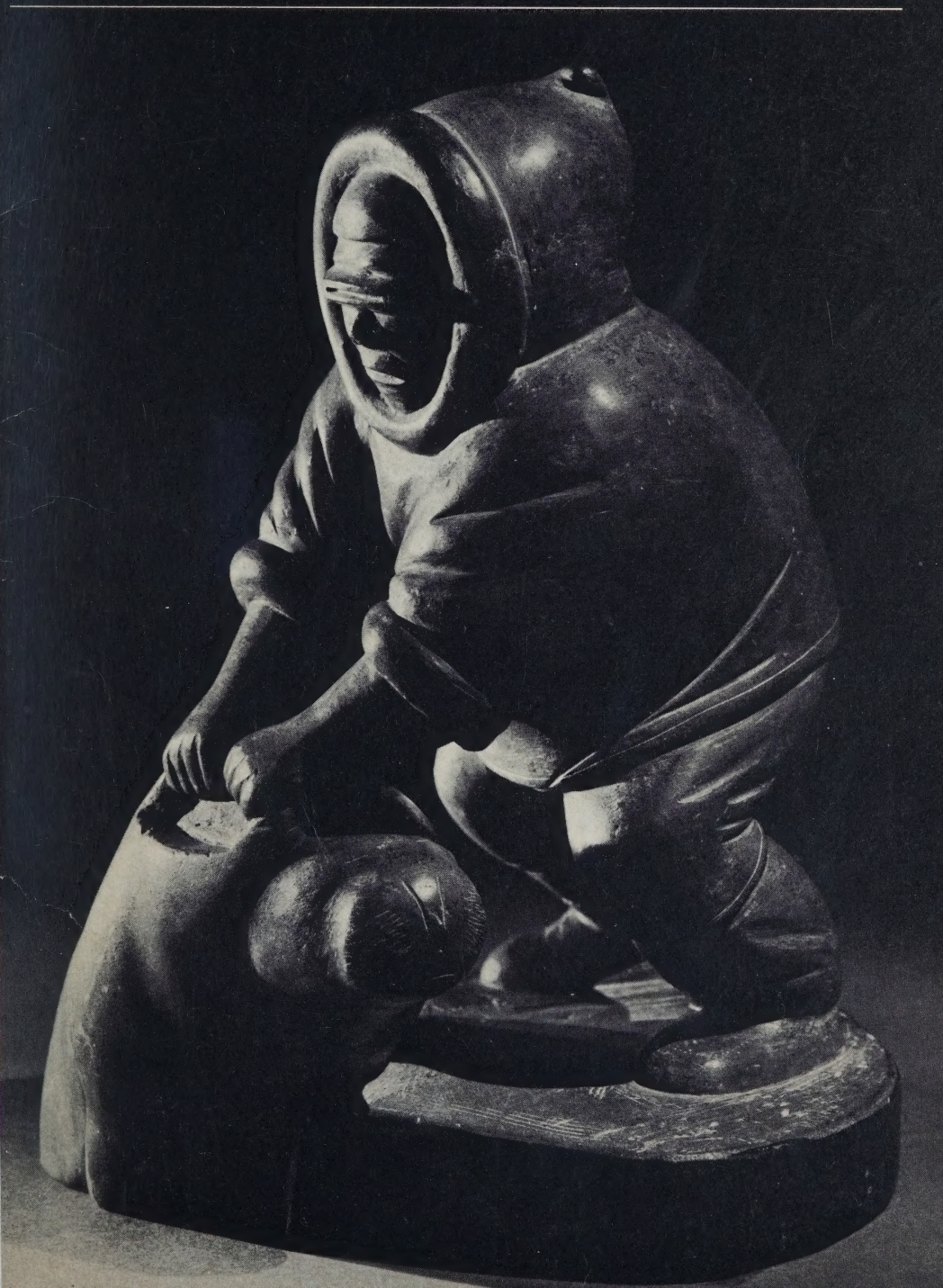
Royal Ontario Museum

The Canadian Eskimos

J. Garth Taylor



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2025 with funding from
Royal Ontario Museum

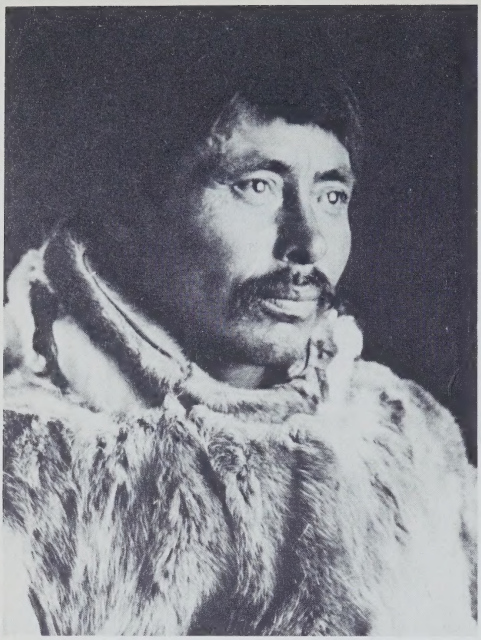
https://archive.org/details/rompublication213rom

The Canadian Eskimos

J. Garth Taylor/Assistant Curator
Department of Ethnology
The Royal Ontario Museum

ROM

Cover: Canadian Eskimo soapstone carving
Photograph: Leighton Warren, ROM



Introduction

The Canadian Eskimos inhabit most of the Arctic coast of mainland Canada and adjacent islands. Although most groups live on the seashore, it has long been customary to make regular and sometimes lengthy hunting excursions to the neighbouring interior. Prior to their discovery by Europeans the Eskimos lived much further to the north than they have in recent times.

Arctic landscape varies greatly. The most spectacular scenery is in the east where high granite mountains cut by numerous fiords form a wall against the ocean. The land gets lower towards the west, becoming a flat limestone plain by the time the mouth of the Mackenzie is reached.

The one constant feature of the Arctic scene is the lack of trees. In the southern areas bordering the tree line isolated patches of spruce, birch and tamarack sometimes grow in river valleys and other sheltered areas. However, throughout most of the Arctic the highest plants are scrub willows, seldom taller than a man. Other forms of vegetation include numerous varieties of moss, grass, wild flowers and berries.

It is the sea which has provided the Eskimo with most of his food, fuel and clothing. Where the coast borders on huge oceans, as in the east, the sea is often very rough and stormy. However, the shallow waters of the central region are usually sheltered by the numerous islands and tend to be much more calm.

During the winter these central Arctic waters freeze solid forming an immense plain of solid ice. In the more tempestuous areas of the east and west a belt of fast ice forms in bays and sheltered areas but beyond this the ice is frequently broken up and piled in rough heaps by the winter storms.

The main feature of Arctic climate is the long, cold winter. At this time of year, days are very short and north of the Arctic Circle there are a few months in midwinter when the sun does not rise above the horizon. On the other hand, there is a period during midsummer when the sun never sets. Although the summer is warm in comparison with the winter, the average temperature during the warmest months seldom exceeds 50° F.

Eskimo man from Baffinland. Photo A. L. Fleming

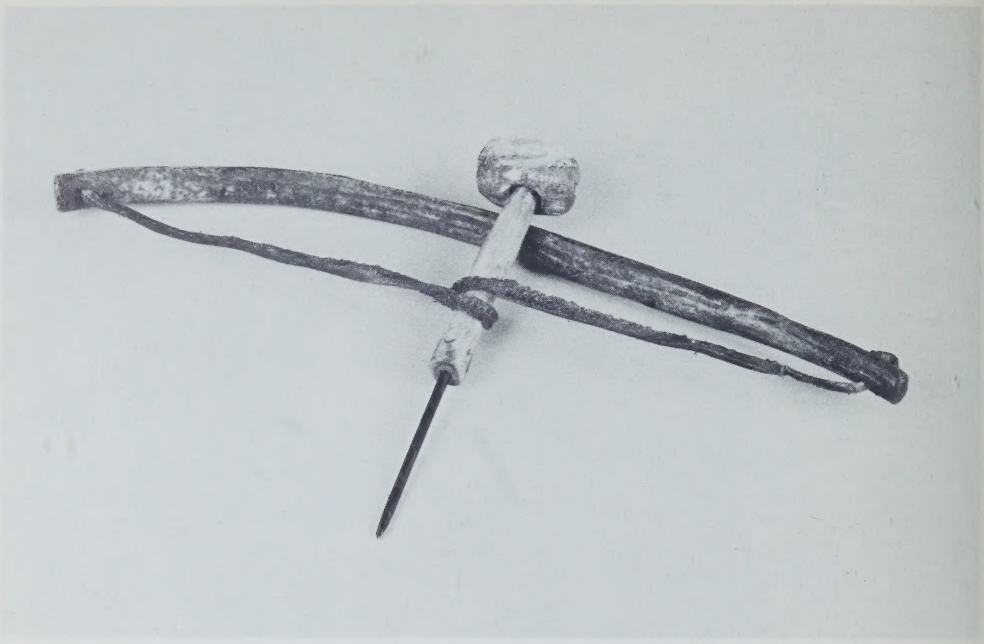
Eskimo woman from Baffinland. Photo A. L. Fleming

Several sea mammals live in the Arctic waters including the large bowhead whale, the beluga or white whale, walrus and several species of seal. Since these animals require oxygen most of them are unable to winter in the central regions where the sea becomes completely covered with ice. The exception is the small ringed seal which can live under ice by keeping open a number of holes through which it can obtain air. Some of the larger land mammals which occur in Eskimo territory are the muskox, polar bear and the migratory caribou. Various ducks and geese spend their summers in the Arctic and several kinds of fish, such as Arctic char, are found in both the sea and inland waterways.

Population and Language

Canadian Eskimos represent less than one-fifth of the total Eskimo population of the world. In 1966 there were approximately 13,000 Eskimos in Canada as compared with 35,000 in Greenland, 30,000 in Alaska and 1,000 in Siberia. When the vast territory inhabited by the Canadian groups is considered their population seems sparse by comparison with their neighbours. This is largely due to the harsher climate and less abundant game supply which characterizes much of the Eskimo habitat in northern Canada. All Eskimo groups speak the same language although dialects vary from one region to another. The closest language to Eskimo is Aleut which is spoken on the Aleutian Islands off the west coast of Alaska.

Major Eskimo groups



Technology

The Eskimos derived most of their raw material for clothing and equipment from the same animals which provided them with food. They used the skin and bones of animals, birds and even fish, sinew and antler from the caribou, horn from the muskox, ivory from the walrus and the black horn-like baleen which grows in the mouth of the bowhead whale. They also used many varieties of stone including slate, flint and soapstone. The Copper Eskimos even made use of copper nuggets which they shaped by pounding rather than melting. Those groups which had access to trees made many things from wood but those who lived in completely barren regions were forced to use driftwood or else find other substitutes.

Men did most of the work with wood, stone, bone, ivory, horn and baleen. One of their most useful tools was the bow drill which consisted of a bone bow strung with thong, a drill of wood or bone with a stone or metal tip, and a socket which was held in the mouth. In order to work the bow drill, the thong was twisted around the shaft of the drill and the bow was moved back and forth.

Eskimo bow drill, used to drill holes and make fire

Two different types of woman's knife

The top of the drill rotated freely in the cup of the mouthpiece, while the point gouged out a hole. By rotating a hardwood drill into a piece of dry softwood it was possible to start a fire.

Women did most of the work with skins. For skinning animals they used the multi-purpose women's knife which had a semi-spherical blade of slate and later of metal. After the skins were dried they were cleaned and softened by means of stone and bone scrapers. Sewing was accomplished with sinew thread and needles made of bone or ivory. Needles were valuable since they were so difficult to make and they were carefully stored in ivory cases.

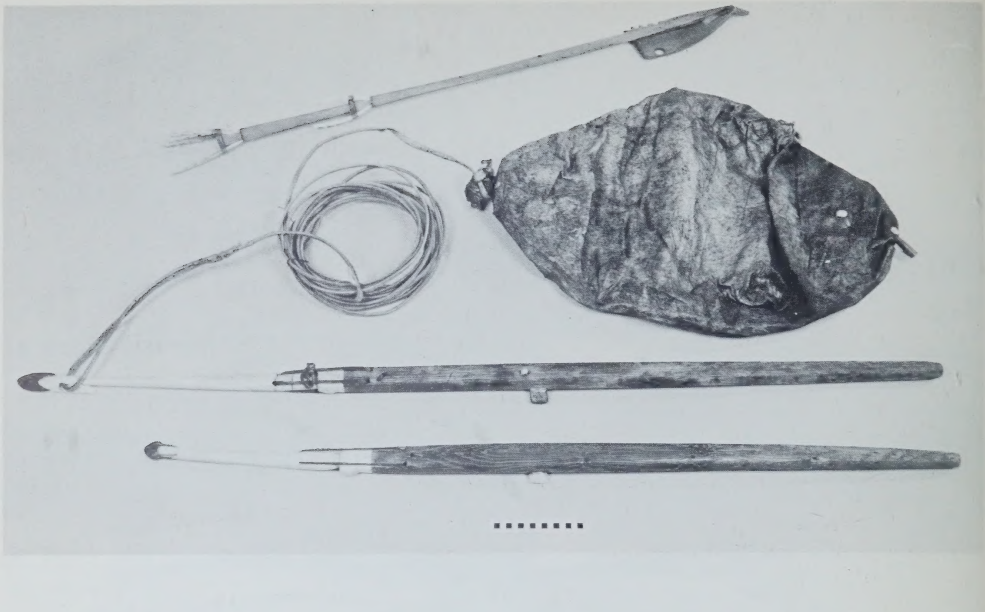
Subsistence

The Eskimos depended both on the sea and on the land for their livelihood. Those who displayed the greatest dependence on the sea were the Labrador, Baffinland and Iglulik Eskimos in the east and the Mackenzie Eskimos in the west. Sea mammals provided these coastal people not only with the bulk of their food, but also with blubber for heat and light and skins for shelter, clothing and boats. Seals and walrus were hunted from kayaks during the time of open water. In winter they were sought at openings in the ice or else in the open water out at the ice edge. On sunny spring days the seals came out to sun themselves on top of the ice and were caught by hunters who imitated other seals. Huge whales were hunted from umiaks which had crews of up to a dozen men. Caribou, which provided warm winter clothing and bedding, were usually obtained on relatively short inland hunting trips which occurred at the end of summer.

The Caribou Eskimos who inhabited the barren grounds west of Hudson Bay lived almost exclusively on caribou, which they hunted both summer and winter, and on the fish which they caught from the inland lakes and rivers. The few Caribou Eskimos who hunted seal and walrus did so only during a brief summer visit to the coast. Because they usually lacked the blubber of sea mammals these people had to light their houses with caribou fat and cook over open fires. Since open fires were impossible in snow houses, they spent their winters without heat.

Between these two extremes were the Copper and Netsilik Eskimos of the central Arctic. These groups spent the summer and autumn hunting for caribou in the barren grounds. However, during the coldest winter months they moved to the coast and lived on seals which were harpooned at their breathing holes in the ice. In order to find the tiny breathing holes, which were usually covered with snow, the Eskimos often depended on the keen scent of their dogs. Since each seal kept open a number of breathing holes the hunter sometimes had to wait for hours and even days before a seal appeared at his spot. Winter camps had to be moved to a new vicinity whenever the supply of seals became exhausted.

Eskimo throwing kayak harpoon. East coast of Hudson Bay, 1913. Photo Robert Flaherty



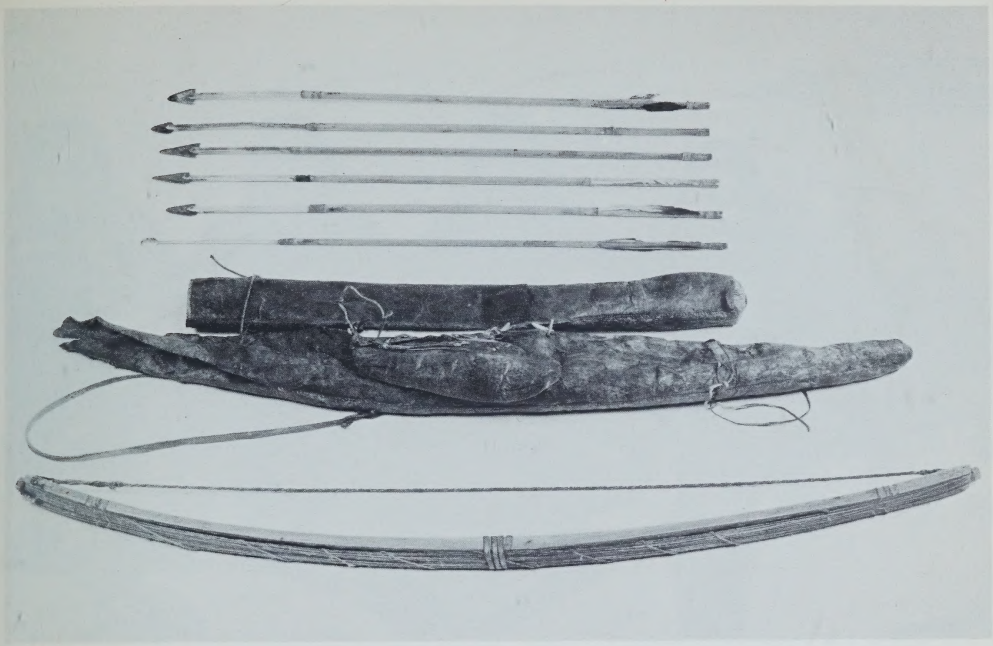
Although sea mammals and caribou were the main source of food, birds and fish were utilized almost everywhere. Birds were caught with spears, arrows, bola stones and with snares of baleen. Fish were caught in stone weirs which were built in rivers and were speared with special three-pronged spears. In the winter, hooks were employed to catch fish through holes in the ice. Birds' eggs and berries provided a minor food source whenever they were available.

Kayak weapons: from top to bottom, bird spear and thrower; harpoon with line and float; killing lance

Weapons

The most important piece of hunting equipment was the harpoon. In order to prevent sea mammals from escaping into the water after they had been struck, the harpoon was designed to secure them to a strong skin line. The skin line was attached to the harpoon head, which was placed on the tip of a bone foreshaft. When the head pierced an animal's body it twisted sideways. This action loosened the head from the main part of the harpoon while at the same time lodging it firmly in the victim's body. An animal could be held on the line until it either bled to death or was finished off with a knife or lance.

There were two basic types of harpoon—one used from kayaks during the season of open water and the other used for hunting seals at their winter breathing holes. The kayak harpoon was designed to be thrown from a distance. Its foreshaft of walrus tusk was attached to the wooden shaft of the harpoon in such a manner that it bent sideways and hung loose when it struck something. This helped to loosen the harpoon head. The end of the harpoon line was usually attached to a sealskin float which marked the position of the wounded game until the final kill could be made with a lance. The ice harpoon did not have a movable foreshaft as did the kayak harpoon. Also, in hunting at breathing holes the harpoon line



was not attached to a float but was merely held in the hunter's hand.

In addition to a harpoon the kayak hunter usually carried a killing lance and a special bird spear. The lance, similar in most respects to the kayak harpoon, had a fixed point instead of a loose head and line. The bird spear was tipped with barbed prongs and sometimes had additional prongs at the middle of the shaft. A wooden thrower was used to hurl the bird spear, giving much more speed than a simple hand throw.

For hunting on land the two main weapons were the bow and the spear. Although the most effective bows were made of wood or baleen, some Eskimos were forced to make them by lashing together several pieces of caribou antler. The back of the bow was usually covered with caribou sinew in order to give extra strength and elasticity. Arrows were made of wood and had bone heads which were tipped with slate or flint. Spears were used on caribou, muskoxen and polar bears whenever it was possible to make a very close approach.

Wooden bow and arrows with skin quiver and bow case. Copper Eskimo

Shelters

Best known of Eskimo shelters was the dome-shaped snow house. This dwelling was constructed of blocks cut with a bone knife from a bank of wind-hardened snow. The blocks were placed side by side in an ascending spiral and snow packed between them to make the dome snug and windproof. Two men working together could build themselves a small overnight shelter in a couple of hours. In areas where the snow house was the only type of winter dwelling the domes were built from ten to twelve feet high and usually housed two families. More elaborate houses had entrance tunnels and porches of snow blocks, ice windows over the entrance and skin linings to prevent the interior from melting away. Sometimes two or more houses formed a cluster, sharing a common entrance tunnel.

Although the snow house was known throughout all of the Canadian Arctic some Eskimos had more permanent winter houses with walls made of sod or stone and skin roofs set on rafters of whalebone. On the southern coast of Labrador and at the mouth of the Mackenzie wood was also used in making winter houses. Like the snow houses these more permanent winter houses had a long entrance tunnel.

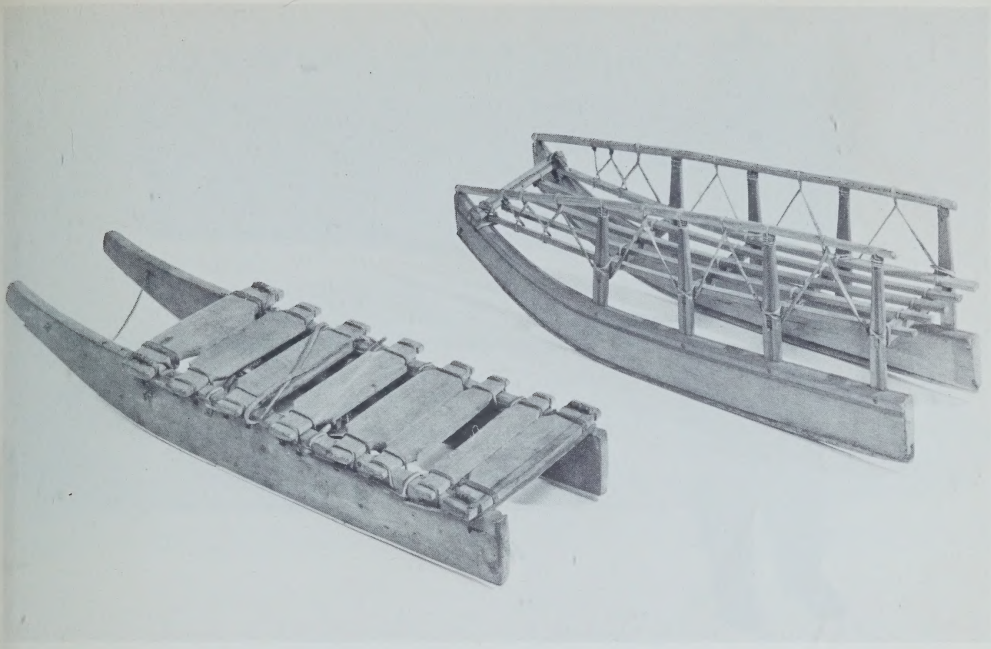
Interior of Iglulik snow house, 1904. Photo A. P. Low

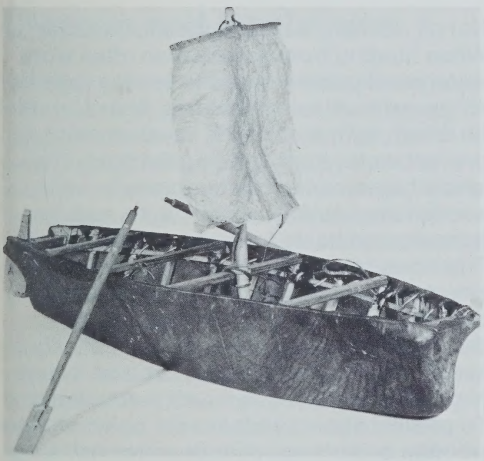
Tents were used as summer dwellings. They had a framework of bone or wooden poles and were covered with seal or caribou skins which were held down at the edges by heavy rocks. The simplest type of tent was shaped like a cone. There was a more elaborate type which had a ridge extending forward from the cone-shaped back portion. The front of the ridge tent formed a vertical triangle.

Transportation

During the long winter period, travelling was done by dog sled. Although most sleds were made of wood some of the groups in treeless regions were forced to find wood substitutes, such as frozen animal skins. The different parts were lashed together with seal thongs, thus giving sleds the necessary flexibility for travelling over rough ice. The bottoms of the runners were either shod with thin pieces of bone or else coated with a combination of mud and ice. The most common and simplest type of sled consisted of two long wooden runners held together by a number of cross-pieces. The cross-pieces rested on the top of the runners and formed a platform on which a heavy load could be lashed. Sometimes caribou antlers or wooden handles were tied to the back of the sled in order to ease steering and handling. The Mackenzie Eskimos often used a more elaborate type of sled which they copied from their neighbours to the west. This western style had upright legs built on the runners. On top of the legs were fastened some rails which extended along each side.

In summer the common means of coastal transportation was the large open skin boat familiarly known as the umiak. In historic times umiaks were used by the Labrador, Baffinland and Mackenzie Eskimos but were not found among the central groups. Umiaks





were usually rowed with oars although paddles were preferred when hunting whales. Square sails made from several strips of walrus intestine were hoisted when winds were favourable. When used in whale hunting umiaks were handled by men only, although in everyday travel rowing was the task of women.

The kayak, with its greater speed but limited load capacity, was designed primarily for hunting sea mammals. However, kayaks were sometimes lashed together to form a sort of raft capable of transporting heavy loads. Although most kayaks were used in the sea, those of the Copper, Netsilik and Caribou Eskimos were paddled mainly on inland lakes and rivers. Sea-going kayaks were usually larger and heavier than those designed for inland travel, since the latter frequently had to be portaged across wide expanses of tundra.

Model dog sleds: (left) eastern type; (right) western type

Model of umiak with sail, oars, and rudder

Clothing and Ornamentation

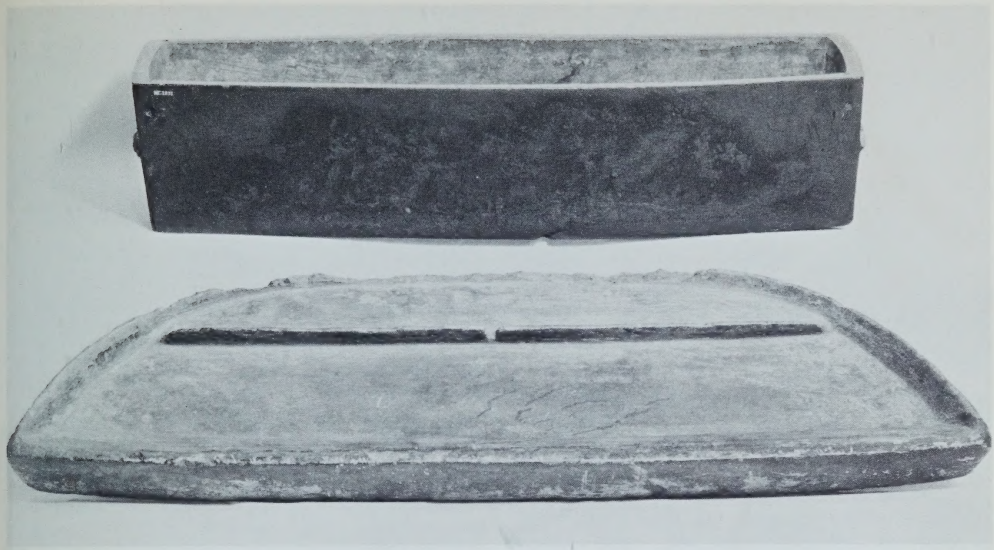
Eskimo clothing provided extremely good protection against the cold northern climate. Sealskin was sometimes used for summer clothing but the best winter clothes were made of caribou hide. Caribou provided a perfect combination of lightness and warmth owing to the fact that each individual hair contained an insulating air space. Other materials sometimes used for clothing were the fur of dogs, muskoxen and polar bears and the skins of birds.

The costume consisted of several parts including a hooded parka, trousers, boots and mitts. In winter two sets of clothing were worn—an inner layer with the fur next to the body and an outer layer with the fur facing out. The costumes of men and women differed slightly. The woman's parka had a much larger hood and usually had a long tail or flap hanging from the back. Women had very short trousers which they wore with hip-length boots or leggings whereas men had longer trousers coming down below their knees. Babies were carried "pick-a-back" style inside their mother's parka.

Not all clothing was designed for warmth. When hunting from kayaks men often wore waterproof jackets made by sewing together strips cut from seal intestines. These could be drawn tight around the kayak opening to prevent water from entering the boat. The whale hunters of Labrador formerly wore combination suits in which parka, mittens, trousers and boots formed a single costume. This costume was made of waterproof sealskin and was entered through a hole in the abdomen which was later closed with a drawstring. The combination suit not only kept a man dry but in case of accident kept him afloat by means of the air it contained. To prevent snow blindness the Eskimos wore wooden or ivory eye shields which had long narrow openings through which to see.

The Eskimos were fond of decoration. Women decorated the edges of costumes with strips of contrasting dark and light fur. West of Hudson Bay they usually sewed fringes on the bottom edge of their jackets. The inner jackets were often decorated with glass beads obtained from traders. Women tattooed their faces by rubbing lamp soot into tiny holes which they pricked in their skin with a needle.

Copper Eskimo man's costume of caribou skin

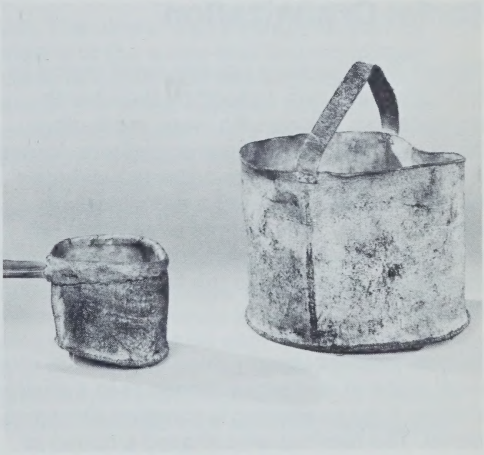


Utensils and Containers

Cooking was done in heavy soapstone pots which were suspended by leather thongs from a framework of wooden poles. Both heat and light were obtained by burning blubber in semi-circular stone lamps. Some lamps had a low ridge which divided them into two compartments. The compartment on the rounded side was for the blubber; that on the straight side was for the moss wick.

Meat and blubber were placed in large bowls of wood or baleen. Ladles of wood and horn were used for drinking soup and scooping out the blood from freshly killed animals. Water buckets and dippers were usually made of baleen or of sealskin.

Small objects were stored in bags of seal and caribou skin or sometimes even of bird skins covered with feathers. Some groups made baskets from coils of dried grass. Large quantities of meat and blubber were stored in skin bags and placed under rocks so that they would not be eaten by wolves and other predators.



Large pot and lamp carved from soapstone

Bucket and dipper made from thick sealskin

Social Organization

Eskimo families were usually small owing to the high death rate caused by their harsh environment. Those who were most often faced with starvation were sometimes forced to kill newborn babies in order to save food for the older family members. In times of famine, old and sick people were often left to die at their own request so that they would not impose a burden on the family food supply.

Several families usually lived together in one large stone or sod winter house or in a cluster of snow houses sharing a common entrance tunnel. The families who shared a house or house cluster were usually related. Often they were the families of an old man and his married sons. In such cases the old man was usually the leader of the whole household group, which averaged about twenty persons.

Settlements frequently consisted of only one or two such household groups. However, there were certain times when several groups came together for communal hunting, trading, visiting or for religious ceremonies.

Large gatherings of about a hundred people occurred among the Copper, Netsilik and Iglulik Eskimos during the midwinter seal hunting. These groups relied on the breathing hole method of sealing and it was necessary for survival to have a large number of hunters to cover as many breathing holes as possible. In Labrador and Baffinland large gatherings usually occurred in the fall whaling season and among the Caribou Eskimos they usually occurred in conjunction with the autumn caribou drives. Game was normally shared among all of the members of the community.

Northern Labrador Eskimos in front of skin tent, 1896. Photo A. P. Low

Recreation

The Eskimos took part in various social activities whenever a group of people got together. One of the most popular was dancing. This was usually performed by one person who led the spectators in a song. The dance was often accompanied by the beat of a skin drum which was either played by the dancer himself or else by one of the onlookers. Other popular group activities were archery contests, wrestling matches and football.

The social activities often took place in special community buildings, which were usually just huge snow houses but occasionally were built of more permanent materials. Sometimes an ivory target was suspended by a cord from the ceiling of the community building and people tried to spear it with a stick. In order to succeed in scoring the stick had to pass through a hole which was drilled in the target.

One of the favourite games was cup and pin. This consisted of a bone, rabbit skull, or ivory carving which was drilled with holes and attached by a piece of sinew to a bone pin. The object was swung in the air by means of the sinew and then an attempt made to catch it by jabbing the pin through one of the holes. Another popular game consisted of small ivory figures which were tossed like dice. The figures, which represented birds or people, belonged to the person whom they faced when they fell.

The women were exceptionally good at making string figures, most of which represented various kinds of animals. Children amused themselves with toy sleds and boats and also with small bows and arrows. The girls played with dolls, which had wooden bodies covered with skin clothing.

Cup and pin game made from a rabbit skull

Religion

The Eskimos believed that most things in the universe had a soul or spirit, which could be pleased or angered by the actions of man. Special care was taken not to offend the spirits of the animals which provided the community with food. Among the many rules which the people had to observe were important taboos preventing the contact of land animals with animals of the sea. Thus, it was forbidden to eat caribou and seal meat on the same day or even to sew caribou skin clothing while hunting seal and walrus.

One of the most important figures in the spirit world of the coastal Eskimos was the goddess of the sea. According to legend, this goddess was once a poor girl who was thrown into the water by her father. When she tried to climb back into his boat, he chopped off her fingers with a hatchet. The joints of her fingers became whale, seals and walrus and the woman looked after these animals from her new home at the bottom of the sea. In Baffinland, where the goddess was known as Sedna, important ceremonies were held every autumn in order to get her to allow the seals to be caught. On these occasions strange figures who wore bulky costumes and skin masks tried to harpoon Sedna and force her to be generous to the hunters.

The men who wore the masks during the Sedna ceremonies were shamans—individuals who had a reputation for their ability to communicate with spirits. In times of famine, storm or sickness the people turned to the shamans to find out what had been done to anger the spirits and what could be done to regain their favour. When shamans worked for individuals, as in curing illnesses, they normally charged for their services. When they worked for the community, they usually performed free of charge.

Owing to the nature of the country, Eskimos were seldom able to bury their dead. Some groups made stone graves with enclosed walls and a roof; others simply surrounded the body with a circle of stones or wrapped it in skins. Some of the Copper Eskimos merely left the corpse inside their tent or hut and moved away to another camp. Weapons, implements and gifts of food were left at the grave for the use of the dead person's spirit.

Skin masks, worn during autumn ceremonies of the Baffinland Eskimos

Trade and Warfare

Most Eskimos tried to obtain goods and materials that were scarce in their own region by trading with their neighbours. The Caribou Eskimos sometimes received sea products from nearby coastal groups in exchange for wood. However, trade often occurred even between different coastal groups. Since soapstone is not found west of the Copper Eskimo area, the western groups formerly bought stone lamps from the people in the east. Trade became much more important after contact with the white man. Some Eskimos travelled incredible distances to exchange furs, baleen and other native products for European trade goods.

Although the Eskimos did not engage in organized warfare, skirmishes with Indians and Europeans sometimes broke out when two groups were trading and usually resulted in bloodshed. Fights with other Eskimos usually started on a personal basis. However, if a person was murdered, it was the duty of his nearest relatives to get revenge. Thus one murder often led to a chain of revenge killings, resulting in a blood feud.

The Eskimo Today

The life of the Eskimo has undergone enormous changes since contact with the outside world. Although many Eskimos still engage in hunting and fishing most of their equipment is made in factories. The ancient weapons have been replaced by guns. Wooden boats and canoes with outboard motors have taken the place of the traditional kayak and umiak and each winter sees more ski-doos and fewer dog teams. Most clothing is bought in the store and houses are usually made of plywood flown in from southern mills. Since the sale of fish and furs is no longer adequate to meet their growing needs, many Eskimos have sought employment in the new towns which have recently developed across the north. Others have turned to the production of handicrafts and soapstone carvings which have earned the Canadian Eskimo artist an international reputation. In their carving, they display the same fine craftsmanship that formerly went into their everyday equipment and made it possible to survive in one of the harshest regions of the earth.

Baffinland Eskimos, *c.* 1920. Note wooden boat and canoe obtained from traders. The people wear a mixture of European and traditional Eskimo clothing. Photo A. L. Fleming

Bibliography

Balikci, Asen/1964
Development of Basic Socio-Economic Units in Two Eskimo Communities.
National Museum of Canada, Bull. 176, Ottawa.

Birket-Smith, Kaj/1929
The Caribou Eskimos
Report of the Fifth Thule Expedition, 1921-24, Vol. 5, Copenhagen.

Birket-Smith, Kaj/1959
The Eskimos (revised), London.

Boas, F./1888
The Central Eskimo. 6th Annual Report Bureau of Ethnology, 1884-5, Smithsonian Institution, Washington.

Boas, F./1901
The Eskimo of Baffin Island and Hudson Bay.
Bulletin of the American Museum of National History, Vol. 15.

Damas, D./1963
Igluligmiut Kinship and Local Groupings: A Structural Approach. National Museum of Canada, Bulletin 196, Ottawa.

Hawkes, E. W./1916
The Labrador Eskimo. Geological Survey of Canada, Memoir 91, Ottawa.

Honigmann, John J. and Irma/1965
Eskimo Townsmen.
Canadian Research Centre for Anthropology, University of Ottawa.

Hughes, C. C./1965
Under Four Flags: Recent Culture Change Among the Eskimos.
Current Anthropology, Vol. 6, No. 1, pp 3-69.

Jenness, Diamond/1923
The Life of the Copper Eskimos.
Report of the Canadian Arctic Expedition 1913-18, Vol. 12, Ottawa.

Jenness, Diamond/1964
Eskimo Administration: II Canada
Arctic Institute Technical Paper No. 14, Montreal.

Jenness, Diamond/1965
Eskimo Administration: III Labrador,
Arctic Institute Technical Paper No. 16, Montreal.

Mathiassen, T./1928
Material Culture of the Iglulik Eskimos.
Report of the Fifth Thule Expendition, 1921-24, Vol. 6, No. 1, Copenhagen.

Rasmussen, K./1929
Intellectual Culture of the Iglulik Eskimos.
Report of the Fifth Thule Expedition, 1921-24, Vol. 5, No. 2, Copenhagen.

Rasmussen, K./1930
Intellectual Culture of the Caribou Eskimos.
Report of the Fifth Thule Expedition, 1921-24, Vol. 7, No. 2, Copenhagen.

Rasmussen, K./1931
The Netsilik Eskimos. Report of the Fifth Thule Expedition, 1921-24, Vol. 8, Copenhagen.

Rasmussen, K./1932
Intellectual Culture of the Copper Eskimos.
Report of the Fifth Thule Expendition, 1921-24, Vol. 9, Copenhagen.

Steensby, H. P./1917
An Anthropogeographical Study of the Origin of the Eskimo Culture.
Meddelelser om Gronland, Vol. 53.

Stefansson, Vilhjalmur/1914
The Stefansson-Anderson Arctic Expedition of the American Museum: Preliminary Ethnological Report.
Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History, Vol. XLV, Part 1, N.Y.

Turner, L. M./1894
Ethnology of the Ungava District.
Eleventh Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology, Washington.

Valentine, V. F. and F. G. Vallee/1968
Eskimos of the Canadian Arctic.
McClelland and Stewart, Toronto.

ROM

Printing: The Hunter Rose Company

Graphic Design: StanBaker ***GRAFIKA***

© Copyright 1971, The Royal Ontario Museum